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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001577

SIPDIS
DEPT FOR SCA/CEN
AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

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TAGS: ECON, EAID, ECIN, ELTN, PREL, AF, UZ
SUBJECT: UZBEK RAIL: RED HOT WHEELS TO AFGHANISTAN

REF: 09 TOKYO 2590

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert McCutcheon, Econ Officer, State, Pol/Econ
Office; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told us
that Uzbekistan Railroads is having difficulty operating freight
trains on its new Karshi-Termez line. Obsolete locomotives with
inadequate brakes result in multiple delays and wheels that glow
red hot by the time a train has completed the mountain crossing.
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Given the

importance of the Karshi-Termez line to the Northern Distribution Network, Post suggests the Department consider approaching Tokyo to ensure that electrification of the Karshi-Termez line receives top priority. END SUMMARY

ELECTRIFICATION OF THE KARSHI-TERMEZ LINE

2. (C) On November 9 we met with XXXXXXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXXXXXX is heavily involved XXXXXXXXXXXX in the construction and operation of Uzbek Railroad's new line through the mountains from Karshi to Termez. The natural, geographically dictated routing from Karshi to Termez is via Turkmenistan, but after independence in 1991, the GOU made the strategic decision to reduce its dependence on routes through now foreign territory. This new line, partially funded by XXXXXXXXXXXX, avoids Turkmen territory but has to contend with steep mountain grades. The first trains rolled down the new track in early 2009.

3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that there have been difficulties operating trains over the Karshi-Termez line. Most locomotives used by Uzbek Railroads are built to the same design as U.S. lend-lease locomotives given to the Soviet Union in World War II. Soviet engineers copied this design and used it to produce locomotives that came to form a significant portion of Soviet rolling stock. The problem with Uzbekistan's legacy Soviet locomotives is that they were never intended for use in mountainous terrain. They have inadequate brakes and must be operated at slow speed. On the descents, the brakes in all wagons are applied continuously, thus necessitating frequent stops so that the wheels can cool. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that by the time trains have descended from the mountains, the wheels are glowing red hot.

4. (C) The Karshi-Termez line carries Northern Distribution Network (NDN) rail traffic to supply U.S. forces in Afghanistan. XXXXXXXXXXXX.

5. (SBU) XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that the next phase for the Karshi-Termez rail line will be electrification. This will be accomplished in four stages over a five-year period, with the steepest grades being

electrified first. The cost is expected to be \$550 million USD; this includes provision for purchase of Chinese manufactured electric locomotives.

6. (C) Only when the electrification program is complete will the Karshi-Termez line be able to transport freight at full capacity. XXXXXXXXXXXXX told us he is worried, however, that the electrification program is competing for priority within XXXXXXXXXXXXX with a program to rebuild power generation stations in Uzbekistan. (NOTE: We believe XXXXXXXXXXXXX is referring to the project to upgrade and reequip

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the Tashkent Power Plant, for which XXXXXXXXXXXXX is to provide approximately \$410 million USD. End Note.) One program will be funded to begin in 2010, and the other will be funded to start in 2011. XXXXXXXXXXXXX told us his XXXXXXXXXXXXX contacts in Tashkent had intimated to him that a well placed word from the USG could influence the decision on which program gets the higher priority.

ROLLING ON BRITTLE TRACKS

7. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX told us he was appalled at how long it takes to transport anything by rail in Uzbekistan. About 70 percent of rail traffic is freight, but a typical train carries only half the freight per wagon as a U.S. wagon -- 50 tons instead of 100 tons. From conversations with Uzbek engineers, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said the limitation appears to be not the trains but the quality of the steel used in the tracks. He described the tracks as brittle and thus subject to fracture if higher loads are transported.

AFGHAN RAILROAD

8. (C) On the ADB-funded 70-80 km rail link from Hayraton to Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, XXXXXXXXXXXXX claimed that Uzbek Railways had padded the construction cost by more than a factor of two. Whereas the rule of thumb for railroad construction in the U.S. is

\$1 million USD per mile, the budget for the new rail line in Afghanistan is \$160 million USD. For a line that will not span any major rivers or face other geological impediments, the main challenge will be security, not engineering.

COMMENT

9. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX's description of current operations on the Karshi-Termez rail line is cause for concern. XXXXXXXXXXXX underlined this by saying he himself refused to travel on the line under current conditions. His description of wheels that are red hot by the end of the mountain crossing implies that a train wreck is possible in the literal sense. Given this and the importance of the line to NDN, Post believes the Department should consider approaching authorities in Tokyo so that the Karshi-Termez electrification project gets top priority. We believe that Japan's support for the rail electrification project would contribute to Afghan reconstruction in a way that is compatible with the new Japanese Government's approach (reftel).

NORLAND